

2-1-2012

Report Says Zetas are now Dominant Drug Cartel in Mexico

Carlos Navarro

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex>

Recommended Citation

Navarro, Carlos. "Report Says Zetas are now Dominant Drug Cartel in Mexico." (2012). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5859>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Report Says Zetas are now Dominant Drug Cartel in Mexico

by Carlos Navarro

Category/Department: Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime

Published: 2012-02-01

The Zetas, which have gained a reputation as Mexico's most brutal drug cartel, are now considered the country's largest criminal organization. A new report from Texas-based global-intelligence company Strategic Forecasting (Stratfor), which is based on data from the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR), said the Zetas have now established major operations in 17 states, surpassing the Sinaloa cartel in geographic reach. The information on the Zetas was part of a larger report that Stratfor put together on all drug-trafficking organizations operating in Mexico.

The Zetas—created by a group of deserters from elite units of the Mexican military forces—were originally the enforcement arm of the Gulf cartel ([SourceMex, Oct. 19, 2005](#), and [July 26, 2006](#))—but broke away to form their own operation ([SourceMex, Jan. 6, 2010](#)). The Zetas not only formed a separate organization but in the process became involved in a territorial battle with the Gulf cartel for the northeastern trafficking corridors. This is a battle that a weakened Gulf cartel appears to be losing, in part because of the arrest of its leader Osiel Cárdenas Guillén ([SourceMex, March 26, 2003](#)), who is now in US custody ([SourceMex, May 12, 2010](#)).

The Stratfor report said another significant factor that has reduced the Gulf cartel's strength is internal strife. "The Gulf cartel (CDG) was strong at the beginning of 2011, holding off several Zetas incursions into its territory," said the report. "However, as the year progressed, internal divisions led to intra-cartel battles in Matamoros and Reynosa."

"The CDG has since broken apart, and it appears that one faction, known as Los Metros, has overpowered its rival Los Rojos faction and is now asserting its control over CDG operations," added the Stratfor report.

Until recently, the Zetas had operated primarily in Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Nuevo León, which had been the traditional Gulf-cartel stronghold. In 2011, the Zetas expanded into the nearby states of Zacatecas and Durango, "achieving a degree of control of the former and challenging the Sinaloa Federation in the latter," said Stratfor.

The cartel has also attempted to move into the Pacific coastal state of Colima, where it is fighting with the Sinaloa cartel for control of the port of Manzanillo, a strategic entry point for drug shipments from Colombia and other South American countries.

The Zetas also continued in an expansion mode last year, consolidating their control of southern Mexico, including Veracruz and the Yucatán Peninsula.

Battle with Sinaloa cartel

The Sinaloa cartel, led by Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, remains a dominant power in western Mexico, and the Zetas' efforts to wrest control of the region have resulted in an increase in violence in states like Sinaloa, Sonora, and Jalisco. Ironically, a recent campaign by the Mexican government to go after the Sinaloa cartel has helped the Zetas gain a foothold in the region.

Among other things, the government has captured several key members of the Sinaloa cartel who were responsible for arms smuggling and money laundering, said Stratfor. Additionally, President Felipe Calderón's administration has moved aggressively to dismantle the Sinaloa cartel's methamphetamine operations. Because of the Mexican government's crackdown, the Sinaloa cartel also lost at least 10 top lieutenants who played a key role in managing the drug-trafficking routes.

Stratfor said the setbacks come at an inopportune time for the Sinaloa cartel, since the supply of armaments and the flow of money are "key in the infrastructure of a criminal organization." The crackdown on the Sinaloa cartel not only diminished the organization's capacity to fight back against the government's forces but also to battle the Zetas, said the report.

The Mexican government has also moved against the Zetas, but its efforts have been less successful. "Despite losing several key leaders...the group maintains its pre-eminence in the east," said Stratfor. "This is largely due to the ease with which such groups can replenish their ranks."

The Zetas' influence on the drug trade has grown to such an extent that other major cartels have joined forces in some areas to counter their influence. "Los Zetas has been battling an alliance of the Gulf, Sinaloa and La Familia drug cartels, known as the Nueva Federación, for control of the Monterrey metropolitan area and smuggling routes into the United States," said Stratfor.

In some areas like Veracruz, the Zetas have suffered a backlash from rival organizations. In September, police found the bodies of 35 people in two trucks in the community of Boca del Rio, a suburb of the city of Veracruz. A group calling itself the Mata Zetas (Zetas killers) posted a video online saying the slayings were part of a campaign to rid the state of the Zetas.

The Veracruz police's inability to prevent the violence raised questions about the competence of local law-enforcement authorities, prompting a state and federal investigation. The probe exposed major corruption in local law-enforcement agencies, prompting authorities to disband the police in the city of Veracruz. State authorities dismissed 900 officers and 46 administrative workers and handed enforcement duties to the military and the state police.

Zetas prefer brutality

The Stratfor report said the Zetas have adopted a vastly different method of operation than other criminal organizations, such as the Sinaloa cartel, which had traditionally remained in power through bribery and coercion. "Sinaloa certainly can and does resort to ruthless violence, but the violence it employs is merely one of many tools at its disposal, not its preferred tactic," said Stratfor.

"On the other hand, Los Zetas prefer brutality. They can and do resort to bribery, but they lean toward intimidation and violence," said Stratfor. "Their mode of operation tends to be far less subtle than that of their Sinaloa counterparts, and with a leadership composed of former special operations soldiers, they are quite effective in employing force and fear to achieve their objectives."

Several of the Zetas' brutal actions have made headlines in the Mexican and international media, including the mass murders of migrants, primarily from Central America. The bodies of victims were found in mass graves at several sites in Tamaulipas state ([SourceMex, Sept. 8, 2010](#), and [Jan. 5, 2011](#)). The Zetas were also thought to be behind the arson that killed dozens of patrons of a casino in Monterrey ([SourceMex, Aug. 31, 2011](#)).

There have been other reports of extreme brutality by the Zetas. Testimony from a US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent at the trial of Zetas leader Gerardo Castillo in Texas revealed some gruesome practices by the cartel.

Accounts presented to a federal jury indicated that DEA agents who had tapped the telephone of a Zetas hit man heard him speak of toasting the Santa Muerte, a folk saint revered by Mexican drug traffickers, with the blood of one of two teenage victims.

Violence among the cartels accounts for a large number of the more than 47,500 people who have died since Calderón launched his war against drug traffickers shortly after he took office in December 2006 ([SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2007](#)). The total includes the government's latest report for January-September 2011, which indicates that nearly 13,000 people died because of drug-related violence. Still, despite the government's insistence that a large number of the victims are people involved in the drug trade, a number of innocent bystanders have also been killed. And the increase in violence has created a high level of uncertainty and insecurity around the country.

Drug violence a key issue in presidential campaign

The drug-related violence is expected to become a major issue during the coming presidential campaigns, along with the economy. Opposition candidates seeking to succeed Calderón as president in 2012—Enrique Peña Nieto of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador of a center-left coalition—have already offered some general proposals on how they would radically change the government's drug-interdiction policies.

But the three candidates seeking the nomination for the governing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN)—Santiago Creel, Josefina Vázquez Mota, and Ernesto Cordero—have also suggested some ways in which the direction of the drug war can be transformed. The PAN nominee will be decided in an election on Feb. 5.

In the meantime, Calderón continues to feel heat from citizens, who blame the government's intense fight against the drug cartels for the rise in violence. "When is this war going to end?" a young man attending a presidential forum in Guadalajara in late January asked Calderón. The questioner also wondered whether the president would retire to a safer country after his term was over.

Calderón offered a response that he has made repeatedly in recent years: that the Mexican military was not the one responsible for the deaths, that the cartels themselves were the ones carrying out the murders. "The deaths in our country have been caused by criminal organizations," said the president.

Calderón said the cartels are using weapons to try to dominate the country and impose their laws on Mexicans. "Our legal system is not dictated by El Chapo or the Zetas or the Gulf cartel," said the president. "The law is what we Mexicans define for ourselves."

-- End --